

Whenever a loved one dies, suddenly or unexpectedly, by unnatural or violent means, family members are left bereaved, sometimes confused, or perhaps angry. One way of helping the family to understand what happened to their loved one is by performing a medical legal post mortem examination. Arkansas State Statute §12-12-315 states, whenever anyone dies in these circumstances, the county coroner, police, sheriff, state police, warden or prosecutor may request an examination from the Medical Examiner's Section in order to determine the cause and manner of death. Permission from the next of kin is not required in these circumstances.

We know that you will have questions about the procedures in the Medical Examiner's Section at the Arkansas State Crime Laboratory, and have prepared this pamphlet to help families understand what can seem like a very complicated process.

The Medical Examiner's Section is authorized to transport the deceased person from the county of origin (where the incident occurred) or where the deceased is being held after pronouncement of death (hospital or funeral home).

The bodies of such deceased persons shall be returned to the county from which they were brought at the expense of the Crime Laboratory only if the Medical Examiner determines death was a homicide, SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) or jail custody death. For all suicides, accidents or natural deaths, the expense of transporting and returning the bodies shall be borne by whomever requested the examination (§12-12-316).

When an examination has been performed by the Crime Laboratory, a certificate of death is issued with the deceased when they are released to the funeral home, unless death was pronounced out of state. **A death certificate serves to certify that a death has occurred, and even if it does not have a specific cause or manner of death listed initially ("Pending"), it is still considered an official document and is registered at the County Health Department and sent to the State Health Department, Bureau of Vital Records.** Copies of the death certificate can be obtained by families either from the funeral home or by contacting Vital Records directly (501-661-2336).

If the death certificate has been ruled "Pending", when the Medical Examiner has made a final ruling as to the cause and/or manner of death, he will issue a supplemental death certificate, which is then mailed to the State Bureau of Vital Records in Little Rock. This may take weeks or, in some instances, months because of the complexity of the case as well as necessary laboratory and investigative studies.

Once the postmortem examination has been completed, the Medical Examiner will release the body to the funeral home chosen by the next-of-kin. The Medical Examiner's Section requires a faxed authorization on funeral home letterhead signed by the next-of-kin before the body can be released. The family is encouraged to call our office to check on the status of reports and death certificates, **but please allow the Medical Examiner a minimum of three months for the completion of the final examination autopsy report.** This allows sufficient time for all ancillary testing to be completed

A report is prepared on every case sent to the Crime Laboratory. The report consists of the investigation findings of the case, as well as medical findings and includes toxicology. An "opinion" page at the end helps to explain the findings as well as the reason(s) for the determination of the cause and manner of death.

A copy of this report is sent out on all cases to the coroner, investigating agency, and the prosecutor. The next-of-kin or insurance companies can request a copy of the report by sending a **notarized** letter of request signed by the next-of-kin and a check or money order made payable to the Arkansas State Crime Laboratory in the amount of \$25.00. An exception to this would be those cases ruled "homicide" or "undetermined". These cases require an additional authorization from the prosecuting attorney in the county where the incident occurred or a court order from a court of competent jurisdiction. Our reports are all privileged and confidential as described in Arkansas Statute §12-12-312.

We hope this has been helpful in answering some of the questions you may have. If you have any other questions, please feel free to call our office from Monday through Friday, 8:00 A.M. until 4:30 P.M.

## Arkansas State Crime Laboratory

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<http://www.arkansas.gov/crimelab>

### Medical Examiner's Section:

501-227-5936

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### Other Forensic Disciplines offered by the Arkansas State Crime Laboratory include:

Latent Print Examination

Drug Analysis

Toxicology

Questioned Documents Examination

Forensic Biology

Trace Evidence Examination

Firearms & Toolmark Examination